

# Fit Facts™

FROM THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EXERCISE®

## TAKE YOUR WORKOUT OFF THE BEATEN PATH

There's nothing like getting away from it all. But vacations seem to come too far and few between. One way to escape the pressures and hectic pace of "city" life is to head to the hills. Hiking as a form of fitness is surging in popularity and it isn't hard to see why — it's a great mind/body exercise. Not only can you get a great workout, taking a hike, alone or with a friend, is a great way to forget your cares and spend a little time with mother nature.

### **SAFETY FIRST**

The essentials of hiking are similar to walking — they are simply taken off road. The best way to get started is to find a safe, cleared path — many state parks have trails marked out with distances and the approximate time it takes to go from point A to point B. For added safety, take a friend or your dog along, and never go hiking after dark.

Another reason to stick to the trails: poison oak or ivy. Your best defense against these skin irritants is to stay clear of them. Don't trust yourself to identify these pesky plants; stick to the trail and avoid brushing against foliage whenever possible.

### **SHOE ESSENTIALS**

Shoes with good traction are an absolute must, particularly if you plan to head up or down any hills. Many manufacturers make shoes designed specifically for trail walking, although you can get by with a good pair of running or walking shoes. Hiking boots, particularly the lightweight variety, are great for keeping your feet dry — streams and ponds often appear unexpectedly after a rainfall. The most

important thing to consider when choosing a shoe is the fit; you don't want blisters or chaffing to keep you from enjoying yourself.

### **KEEP YOUR ENERGY UP**

It's always a good idea to bring along some water and even a snack when heading out, even for shorter hikes. Don't let yourself get so distracted by the beautiful sights around you that you forget to drink fluids and become dehydrated. Drink at least 4 ounces of water every 20 minutes or so, even when the weather is cold.

Dress in layers, particularly during unpredictable weather seasons such as spring and fall. Insect repellent and plenty



of sunscreen also are essential. You may want to invest in a day pack that straps around your waist to keep these items close at hand.

### **PACING YOURSELF**

How fast you take to the trails is up to you and what you want to accomplish. A hike can be an intense workout or a time to relax your mind and enjoy nature, or both — the choice is yours.

If you want to increase the intensity of your workout, hills are a great way to do it. When starting out, take it easy and give your muscles, particularly your quadriceps (the front of the thigh) and your calves, time to adapt to the increased demands of hiking. Once you've been hiking regularly for a few weeks, give yourself a challenge by tackling a hill or two. Not only will this increase your muscular strength and endurance, you'll notice a big improvement in your cardiovascular endurance as well.

### **READY, SET, HIKE!**

Hiking is a great activity to add to your existing fitness regimen. Not only can it add variety and spice up your routine, but integrating hiking into your workouts also will give you the benefits of cross training. Rather than giving the same muscles the same workout day after day, hiking will challenge your muscles to perform in a whole new way. But perhaps the greatest benefit of hiking is the chance to get away from it all, if only for just a short while.

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